

The Importance of Civil-Military Relations
And the Future of the United States
As a World Superpower

EWS Contemporary Issues Paper

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20 February 2009

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 20 FEB 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Importance of Civil-Military Relations And the Future of the United States As a World Superpower				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development,Marine Corps University, 2076 Main St.,Quantico,VA,22134				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See Report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

**The Importance of Civil-Military Relations
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The relationship between the United States' public and its powerful military may ultimately determine the outcome of the Global War on Terror. A separation between the military and the democratically elected governing public has always existed; however, in the last half century the civil-military divide has grown to an alarming level. This disparity has undermined the nation's foreign policy, has placed its civilian leadership at a disadvantage in negotiations, and has weakened the influence the U.S. military has in safeguarding the country's interests at home and abroad. To maintain America's influence as a world power, the U.S. must improve civil-military relations by increasing the public's knowledge of military history and its armed forces, reconnecting communities with the military, and by emphasizing the importance of civil-interaction with service members.

Background

Historically, Americans have held a distrust of strong militaries, dating back to the stationing of British soldiers in the colonies after the French and Indian War. British rule and the taxes imposed on the colonies influenced the Founding Fathers to maintain armies at minimal strength.¹ "Even during

the Revolutionary War, 'The Continental Congress supervised the Continental Army with irrational distrust.'"² However, Americans continued to support strong local militias, reinforcing a sense of duty and service. Only as recently as WWII has maintaining a larger military force been accepted as necessary. Nevertheless, America's leaders have exercised great caution in controlling the power and influence the military can project.

Current Civil-Military Relations

According to many scholars, relations between the armed forces and the public have deteriorated to the lowest levels in U.S. history. Undoubtedly, civil distrust created by the handling of the Vietnam War and the establishment of the all volunteer force (AVF) in 1973, served as catalysts in dissolving civil-military relations.³ As a consequence, cultural beliefs and values held by the military and society divided further. Scholars Gronke and Feaver note that this relationship reached a tipping-point in the 1990's when it was strained beyond sustainable levels by the growing separation. They also point out that the public's overwhelming support of the troops, as distinguished from U.S. military policy, is misleading.⁴ Unfortunately, at no time in history has the governing public understood the military less than it does today.

Increasing the Public's Knowledge of the Military

The divide between society and the military places civilian leaders at a disadvantage, alienates the public, and weakens the military's ability to protect American interests at home and abroad.⁵ By reconnecting and educating the public, the U.S. will ensure that civilian leaders have the understanding to employ the military responsibly and that the public can reasonably provide oversight to political institutions by electing capable officials. The current disconnect between civilian officials and military leaders emphasizes the importance of education in U.S. colleges and high schools.

Recent terrorist related events have highlighted the importance of civilian understanding and employment of military forces. As an example, on 12 October 2000, the *USS Cole* was bombed in the Yemeni port of Aden, resulting in the deaths of 17 crewmembers. Reports indicated that the area was a terrorist haven; nonetheless, political decisions and reduction in logistical support forced military planners to use the port as a refueling location. Fault and blame has been placed on the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and military, but ultimately it was the civilian policy makers that disregarded military concerns and placed U.S. service members in harm's way unnecessarily.⁶ Likewise, an argument can be made that the strained relationship between the military and Clinton

administration resulted in the failure to respond appropriately to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the East African embassy bombings in 1998, and finally the *USS Cole* attack in 2000.⁷ Not until the terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001 did the U.S. government recognize the attacks as aggressions warranting a major response.

To understand this apparent disconnect between the military and the civilian leaders one must understand trends in U.S. education systems. In 2008, journalist Jessica Chapman argued that a direct correlation can be made between the lack of military history taught in U.S. colleges to the ability of subsequent leaders to employ the armed forces properly.⁸ David Bell, a professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, notes that military history is severely lacking in courses taught at major institutions. He remarks that of the 85 history classes taught at Harvard University in spring 2007, merely two dealt specifically with military history. Bell also states, "just two of our (Johns Hopkins) 61 spring courses are principally concerned with war."⁹ He goes on to examine the relevance of military events in the understanding of history and points to the distinct shortage of professional studies on the subject in the halls of academia.

Few professors or historians will argue the fact that wars and military history have shaped and molded the world over the last 3000 years; however, U.S. universities have shifted away from the study and understanding of the military as society's academic focus has shifted towards social, commerce, and economic issues. Nevertheless, institutions cannot be coerced or forced to bring military history back into college curriculum. One effective method employed by the public and the U.S. government during the Cold War was the creation of foundations and grants that funded the study and exploration of military history.¹⁰ The focus should not only be on past wars, military tactics, or the importance of a balanced military, but also on the role of militaries in the framework of great nations. Judith Stiehm, professor of political science at Florida International University, argues that professors must prepare students to understand not only their government, but also the military.¹¹ As the relationship divide between civilian leadership and military leaders widens, the necessity of education for civilian leaders increases exponentially.

For example, in 1975 approximately 72 percent of the U.S. Congress had military experience. In 2003, the number of U.S. congressional officials with prior military service was approximately 30 percent.¹² By 2007, the number declined further

to 24 percent, with 23 percent in the U.S. Senate and 29 percent in House of Representatives.¹³ Tim Kane of The Heritage Foundation examines this trend within U.S. in "liberal elite" universities. Kane notes that just nine graduates of Princeton's class of 2004 elected to serve in the military.¹⁴ Although military service is not necessary for effectively leading in public office, the decline in the number of retired military serving in Congress is alarming. As the percentage of citizens with direct experience with the military decreases, the public, including politicians, must be educated in the history and role of those who protect their freedoms.

The importance of knowledge and understanding of military strategy by civilian leaders can be highlighted by recent decisions made during the Iraq War. On 23 May, 2003, the Bush Administration decided to disregard military recommendations and ordered the Coalition Provisional Authority to completely dissolve Iraqi military forces. Prior to the execution of the Iraq War in November 2002, the National Defense University, Strategic Studies Institute at the Army War College, and the State Department all recommended to the civilian leadership in the White House that the post war dissolution of the Iraqi military should be a phased downsizing. Further, military agencies and think-tanks advised the Bush Administration that

the Iraqi military is the one stable entity in Iraq and should be carefully phased down to manageable levels in the post war reconstruction phase. Not until a strong insurgency had surfaced in 2004, which many attribute to insufficient internal security, did the Bush Administration reverse its policy and begin to interact with former Iraqi military leaders.¹⁵ Additionally, on 25 February, 2003, Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, recommended to the Senate Armed Services Committee that "Something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers...would be required" for post-war reconstruction. The White House's response to this recommendation was that it was "wildly off the mark."¹⁶ The country's military advisors were dismissed by a civilian administration in the initial execution of the war plan, resulting in an insurgency that could have been mitigated, saving thousands of lives and billions of tax payer dollars.

Military Involvement in the Community

In addition to emphasizing education, the military must increase its involvement and exposure in the community. One program that bridges the civil-military divide is the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). In 1916 the National Defense Act created the ROTC program. Although similar programs existed before, the ROTC program focused on training citizen-soldiers

for the reserves and National Guard. The unintended effect was the creation of a bridge between the military and civilian communities. However, over the century the ROTC program has seen a decline in many universities, including the prestigious Ivy League schools. Reductions in accreditation for students and faculty, and open resistance to the military on campuses have been leading factors in the reduced ROTC presence.

Although re-introduction of the ROTC into some of these elite schools would produce relatively few officer candidates, the exposure to the military is critical in closing the gap.¹⁷

Recruiting, ROTC programs, and job fairs on high school and college campuses also are critical to orienting students who have little experience or professional classroom instruction on military history.

Exposing public communities to the military is important outside of schools and universities, as well. Military public affairs plays a crucial role in creating a transparent view of what the military is doing to protect the country and to influence policy around the world. Emphasis on an open and honest dialogue between the military and the American public is essential to a healthy social structure in the U.S. In "Call to Duty" Kristinha Anding investigates several public companies that have colluded with the military public affairs departments

to bring the stories of American service members into 92 million U.S. homes. The stories and videos are distributed to popular media outlets such as YouTube and more conventional networks around the U.S. and other countries.¹⁸ These companies understand the gap that exists between the public and military and have aggressively sought to fill the void. These types of public-government ventures are essential to bringing the military back into the homes and communities of the average citizen. Other options are increasing the presence of service members in mentor and role model positions in U.S. inner city schools and community centers. The focus of these service members would be to provide structure and discipline, not recruiting efforts to the youths. This would require oversight and training, but the results would be positive exposure in the community, guidance to youths, and indirect contact to parents and educators.

Emphasizing Civil-Military Relations with Service Members

As the nation rebuilds its connection between the public and its fighting men and women, leaders must be careful to underscore the importance of educating the military on the importance of civil-military relations as well. Service members, especially officers, play a crucial role in bridging the divide between the public and the armed forces. Although

the U.S. military is composed of citizen-soldiers, the existing gap often creates a sense of animosity toward public views and ideals. This is partly attributed to the natural inclinations of a liberal democracy and the relatively conservative views of a military. However, this problem has been exacerbated by the decreased participation of society serving in the armed forces. In fact, "the proportion of eligible young men serving in the military is less than 10 percent...of age eligible males who served in past conflicts were: 80 percent (World War II), 50 percent (Korean War until the 1960s), and 40 percent (Vietnam)." ¹⁹

As the result of a comprehensive analysis of this gap between the U.S. public and the military, Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn developed several solutions for improving those relations. One of those solutions is bridging the gap by increasing the study of civil-interaction with the armed forces.²⁰ In analyzing the curriculum at all of the War Colleges, Judith Stiehm also underscores the importance of continued study and understanding of civil-military relations among the militaries highest ranking officers. She points out the blurred lines that exist between military and political decisionmaking and the ethical and moral responsibility of service members to avoid improperly influencing civilian

leadership.²¹ All of these authors examine the importance of educating the military and the role service members play in civil-military relations. Although many of the views in Stiehm's publication ignore the importance of military hierarchy and unity of command, her examination of civil-military education in the War Colleges provides good insight into the military's focus on improving relations with the civil sector.

As operations in the Global War on Terrorism continue, public support is critical to the fight against a devoted enemy that is not ruthless in the trenches, but astute in the art of manipulating the masses. A well-educated public that understands its military, develops sound policies, and feels connected to the citizen-soldiers on the battlefield is more likely to show the resolve necessary to succeed in this Long War. Failure to bridge the civil-military gap will result in alienating the public from the men and women who fight and die for their country. It will also risk the creation of civilian leadership that is completely inept at properly employing the military.

Counterarguments

Some will argue that a close relationship between our military and policy makers prevents elected representatives from making unbiased decisions on the security of our nation.

Advocacy against bridging the gap is primarily from extreme leftist groups; however, some of the country's respected liberal elites argue that placing service members in advisory roles within our government creates undue influence on elected officials, thus taking away the power of the people to influence decisions. The argument is based on the premise that military leaders are in service to follow orders, not make policy. Many of the oppositions to creating a strong bond between the public and military is based around the false understanding that it will create a military that controls government decisions. The underlying premise is flawed at all levels. There is little threat in the U.S. of a military overthrow, and advisors to elected officials do not make policy. Nevertheless, many of the country's liberal elites fight to distance military presence in our communities, schools, and the government. Unfortunately, those liberal elites often carry great credibility with the public, not only on their subject matter expertise in economics, social sciences, or education, but on their military views.

Other arguments against forming closer relations between the military and the public are based on misinformed perceptions of our military leaders. These perceptions are largely formed on selective history, uninformed knowledge of military training, and sensitivity to war in general. Opposition is often founded

on the simple misperception that those within the military will always favor war over peace. The U.S. military's separation from the public since the Vietnam War has only made it more difficult for the public to discern the necessity of a strong military force, yet at no point since the Revolutionary War has a strong military force been more relevant in this country's history.

Closing

The Global War on Terrorism and shifting world powers have created a unique challenge for U.S. foreign policy, creating unforeseen pressure on diplomatic, economic, military, and social influence around the globe. Wrong or right, U.S. military forces have been used around the world at an increasing rate to influence political goals, for humanitarian relief, crisis intervention, and full-scale war. At the same time, the gap in civil-military relations has reached a critical divide. With civilian leaders relying on the armed forces to perform an increasing number of duties, the military must reconnect with the public. The U.S. military's projection of force must be grounded in a well-educated public who can provide support and guidance to military leaders. Failure to close the current civil-military gap will undermine U.S. foreign policy and weaken the security of the country.

Endnotes

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- ² Weigley, Russell F. "The American Civil Military Cultural Gap: A Historical Perspective, Colonial Times to the Present." In *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil Military Gap and American National Security*, eds. Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2001: 220, quoted in David L. Leal, "Students in Uniform: ROTC, the Citizen-Soldier, and the Civil-Military Gap," *PS, Political Science & Politics* (2007) 40, 479-483.
- ³ Richard M. Wrona Jr. , "A Dangerous Separation: the Schism Between the American Society and Its Military," *World Affairs: Military and Intelligence Collection*, Summer 2006:25-26.
- ⁴ Peter Fever and Richard Kohn. "Conclusion: The Gap and What It Means for American National Security." *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001),132.
- ⁵ Leal, 481.
- ⁶ Jamie Dettmer, "Fallout from USS Cole Attack Covers Washington," *Insight on the News*, 13 November 2000: 6.
- ⁷ Andrew C. McCarthy, "Three Years and Counting," *National Review*, 13 December 2004: 34.
- ⁸ Jessica Chapman, "Civic Casualties," *Utne*, January 2008: 8-9.
- ⁹ David Bell, "Casualty of War," *New Republic*, 7 May 2007: 16.
- ¹⁰ Bell, 17.
- ¹¹ Judith Hicks Stiehm. "Things Students and Political Scientists Might Consider About Our Military," *PS, Political Science and Politics*, 1 July 2007: 453-456.
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- ¹³ *Declining Military Experience in Congress*. MOAA. 2008.
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- ¹⁸ Kristinha M. Anding, "Call to Duty," *Digital Content Producer*, June 2004: Vol. 33, Iss. 6; 58.
- ¹⁹ Wrona, 30.
- ²⁰ Feaver and Kohn, 470.
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